

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

05 October 2006

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Welch, E. (2001) 'Commitment, commercialism and the dawning of image culture : the early years of L'Express.', Web journal of French media studies., 4 (1).

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://wjfms.ncl.ac.uk/express.htm>

Publisher's copyright statement:

Additional information:

This article cannot be republished without prior permission from the Journal Editors and the author.

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

Commitment, commercialism and the dawning of image culture: the first years of *L'Express*

Dr Edward Welch

Department of French,

University of Durham,

Elvet Riverside,

New Elvet,

Durham.

DH1 3JT

e.j.welch@dur.ac.uk

Thanks to the work of Kristin Ross (1995) in particular, the significance of the changes which affected France in the 1950s and 60s is becoming increasingly recognised. It is a period marked above all by accelerated economic growth and modernisation, which brought with them corresponding socio-cultural changes that continue to affect France today. One of the most interesting ways to trace these changes is through the pages of the mass media, and the representations of French society and culture they were putting into circulation at the time — all the more so since, in the post-war years, this sector was itself undergoing rapid expansion and evolution. Women's magazines arrived in France in 1946 with the launch of *Elle*. 1949 saw the arrival of photojournalism in the form of *Paris-Match*, the importance of which in establishing and reinforcing dominant ideologies was quickly recognised by Roland Barthes¹. A third important innovation was the news weekly. The first of these, launched in 1950, was *France-Observateur* (which would become *Le Nouvel Observateur* in the 1960s). It was joined in 1953 by *L'Express*, edited by Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber and Françoise Giroud, who had left *Elle* to work on the project. *L'Express* soon asserted itself as the more successful and influential of the two news weeklies, outpacing its rival to sell nearly 150,000 copies by 1955, and going on to become one of the most important and intriguing features of the media landscape of the 1950s and 60s.

Central to this are its political allegiances. Through its close relationship with the Radical Party leader, Pierre Mendès-France, the journal placed itself at the forefront of the drive for post-war modernisation. It was also outspoken in its criticism of the French government's handling of the conflicts in North Africa, which led it to be seized regularly by the authorities. Indeed, throughout the 1950s, *L'Express* bore all the hallmarks of a crusading, committed journal, an impression reinforced by the regular appearance in its pages of some of the leading intellectual figures of the time, such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and François Mauriac.

Yet what marks out *L'Express* in particular is that it can be seen not only as an *agent* of change, participating fully in the redevelopment of the nation through its ties with Mendès-France, but also as itself a *symptom* of the changes affecting France at the time. It reflects the mutations of French society firstly through its very existence (it was designed to offer a weekly digest of news and opinion for an increasingly busy middle class unable to spare the time to read a daily newspaper), and secondly, and more importantly, through the way in which it evolves during the first ten years of its life. For by the

mid-1960s, *L'Express* was a rather different animal: it had transformed itself into a glossy news magazine, the lifestyle bible of the young middle classes, and had become the subject of satirical portraits by Godard, de Beauvoir and Perec.

It is the magazine's evolution over the first ten years of its life which this article sets out to explore. It argues that central to it is a tension between commitment and commercialism: while *L'Express* may appear to be a committed and earnest journal, it is also a business which must survive in a competitive market. The article goes on to suggest that the working out of this tension in favour of the logic of commercialism, and the magazine's subsequent transformation from a *journal d'opinion* into a *journal d'information*, help bring to light broader trends at work in French culture and society at the time. Most notably, they allow us to observe the birth of both what will become known in the 1960s as the *société de consommation*, and what we can call the 'image culture' which accompanies it.

One question above all seemed to preoccupy French minds in the post-war years: what direction should the country take as it emerged from war? What should its future be, and how best could France be prepared for it? The destruction suffered during the Second World War had in fact provided a clean sheet on which to plan its radical reorganisation, and create a definitively modern country. The question was being asked with particular force by the team at *L'Express*. The *Express* of the 1950s stands out in particular for the strength of its convictions. It was run by a group of people who, as Françoise Giroud puts it, 'voulaien de toutes leurs forces faire "décoller" la France' (1972: 138). They were intent on helping to redefine France, and define the modernity it would experience. Their task was an urgent one, however, successive governments of the unstable Fourth Republic having failed to deal successfully with an economy which was finding it difficult to recover from the effects of the war, and which was stagnating at a time when growth was urgently required — for it was clear to all that recovery and modernisation could only be predicated on economic growth and renewal.

L'Express was in no doubt that the best solution lay in the left-of-centre agenda being put forward by Mendès-France. The close links between the news weekly and the leader of the Radical Party were forged early on, and signalled by the long interview it published in its first issue, in which he set out his plans for reform². Indeed, during the 1950s, *L'Express* would become the unofficial organ of the Radical Party, and the main platform from which its leader addressed the voters. Mendès-France was one of the key thinkers on the economy in French politics in the 1950s, having been involved in drawing up the first economic plans after the Liberation. An early advocate of Keynesian economics, he argued that state intervention was essential, in the form of productive investment, to ensure a strong industrial and manufacturing base. At the same time, he recognised the importance of enterprise, and the need to ensure a strong market economy: efficiency and productivity were to be stimulated and improved by opening up the French market to foreign competition. Overall, and crucially, it was clear that modernisation was dependent not just on economic growth, but more specifically, on promoting the manufacture, and therefore the consumption, of goods — dependent, in other words, on consumer capitalism.

In order to succeed, of course, this in turn depended on the presence of willing consumers. Now, one of the key problems facing the governments of the Fourth Republic was precisely the *lack* of such a consumer culture. As Richard Vinen points out, while it had certainly existed on the Parisian boulevards since the end of the Nineteenth Century, France as a whole 'remained dominated by a culture of self-sufficiency, utilitarianism and meanness' (1996: 121). In other words, for economic take-off to be achieved required nothing less than the wholesale re-education of the French, and the creation of a consumer society. The time had come to usher a traditionally frugal and reluctant French population towards the market, and encourage them to spend and consume.

L'Express is both intriguing and important because its support for Mendès-France and his ideas went beyond a series of favourable editorials. Convinced that he was the only politician capable of carrying out the necessary reforms, it devoted itself entirely both to the possibility of bringing Mendès-France to power, and to the rebirth of France along the lines he was suggesting. As Giroud makes clear, 'dans ses implications politiques — et l'imbrication est constante — l'économie a été la raison d'être de *L'Express*' (1972: 153). As we shall see, it came to play a full and complex part both in the promotion of the tenets of liberal economics and in the re-education of the French required by the system. It is in this sense that we can talk of the magazine's commitment, a commitment demonstrated graphically in October 1955 when, in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of January 1956, it turned itself into a daily in order to support Mendès-France's campaign more effectively, despite the financial risks involved.

Indeed, in the way it sets out to promote a clear agenda, rooted firmly in an economic and political philosophy, *L'Express* of the 1950s could be said to have something in common with Sartre's *Temps modernes*, launched a few years previously in 1945. The journals demonstrate a similar ethos in their belief that it is through dynamic intervention, the persuasiveness of writing, and the pooling of ideas and resources, that change can be brought about. Their complementarity is suggested further by the way *L'Express* repeatedly played host to leading figures of *Les Temps modernes*, including Merleau-Ponty and Sartre himself. In the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, for example, Sartre chose the magazine to announce his split with the Communist Party.

More accurately, perhaps, *L'Express* of the 1950s can be described as bringing the serious and weighty analysis of the specialist or academic press — that found in journals such as *Les Temps modernes* — to a wider audience, or what might be called today the mass market. Looking back, Giroud underlines how she saw the magazine's role as being that of an intermediary between a form of 'brains trust' defining and shaping the new France and the general public: 'c'était une aventure assez originale en ceci qu'elle réunissait une poignée de véritables journalistes [...] c'est-à-dire des gens capables de mettre des idées en forme de façon qu'elles soient claires et frappantes, de les simplifier, de les diffuser, et une poignée de hauts fonctionnaires, d'universitaires, de chefs d'entreprise, d'hommes politiques, capables de nous livrer [...] les véritables éléments d'appréciation et d'analyse qui fondaient nos positions' (1972: 152). In the early years especially, *L'Express* carried a number of items on the economy, giving summaries of official government audits, or using strip cartoons to explain the principles of industrial reconversion. It explored too other issues likely to be of concern to forward-thinking Frenchmen — nuclear power, urban renewal, economic cooperation in Europe.

Also central to the news weekly's efforts was the fact that this 'brains trust' counted some impressive names among its members. In the 1950s, *L'Express* counted most of the major post-war intellectuals — not just Sartre, but also Mauriac, Camus and Malraux — among its regular contributors. Its most sustained collaboration was with Mauriac, who contributed a weekly political column, the *bloc-notes*, for seven years. He was invited to join the magazine in 1954, after having broken off his involvement with *Le Figaro*, where he had been an editorialist since the 1930s, but where his increasingly liberal, anti-colonialist stance brought him into conflict with the paper's editorial board and its readers.

If Servan-Schreiber was keen to seek out the involvement of figures such as Mauriac, it was because of the particular status they had come to achieve in society, or what Pierre Bourdieu would call the 'symbolic capital' they possessed. This is the name Bourdieu gives to the prestige accumulated over time by certain individuals, not simply as a result of their activities in a particular field, but also because society has recognised, or in some sense accredited those activities. For Bourdieu, 'le capital symbolique, c'est n'importe quelle propriété (n'importe quelle espèce de capital, physique, économique, culturel, social) lorsqu'elle est perçue par des agents sociaux dont les catégories de perception sont telles qu'ils sont en mesure de la connaître et de la reconnaître, de lui accorder valeur' (1994: 116).

Intellectuals are individuals acknowledged by society as having moral authority, and who are authorised by society to speak on its behalf as a voice of the collective moral conscience. They are recognised as being the repositories of some sort of truth. Symbolic capital is essential for any agent intending to intervene successfully in the world — for *L'Express* to substantiate its claim to be an important player in the political field, for example. As a newcomer, the magazine possesses only a very small amount, but neither has it got time to wait for its potentially slow and gradual accumulation. If it is to achieve its ambition and make an immediate political impact, the capital must be accrued in other ways: by hosting intellectuals in its pages, *L'Express* can co-opt some of their capital. Their presence lends it symbolic weight in turn, makes it a voice to be taken seriously. As Françoise Giroud points out, 'quand on fait un journal, c'est-à-dire quelque chose qui doit être frappant dans l'instant et pas rétrospectivement, [...] il vaut mieux, en effet, y donner la parole à des gens qui ont une certaine "force de frappe" (1972: 189).

If, however, if *L'Express* resembled *Les Temps modernes* in its general ethos and spirit of *engagement*, it of course remained radically different in one essential way — namely, in its relationship to the market. It is here where we find the contradictions inherent in *L'Express*, contradictions which will take just over ten years to resolve. For where the whole philosophy of Sartre's journal was reflected in the way it stood aloof from the rigours of the market, that of *L'Express* was reflected by the fact that it was prepared to embrace it. *L'Express* is a committed journal arguably committed to one task especially — that of promoting the consumer society on which the success of the new agenda of reform depends, and helping to usher the French towards the market. Furthermore, a notable feature of the magazine is the way in which its commitment to this agenda can be seen to manifest itself not only explicitly, in weighty political and economic analyses, but also in the seemingly unrelated, apolitical areas of the magazine — areas where, in effect, the theoretical ideas are translated into the more recognisable terms of everyday life.

One of the most important examples of this is *Madame Express*. The magazine introduced a section devoted to womens' interests, entitled *une page au féminin*, in 1954. This expanded and became *Madame Express*, 'supplément pratique', in 1958. The *page au féminin* — a radical innovation in the realm of the political press — was created in response to the fact that *L'Express* counted a large number of women amongst its readers (at 36%, by far the largest among the *journaux d'opinion*); but its appearance can also be understood as a pragmatic reaction to the key role women were beginning to have in the building of a consumer society. The editors themselves make this point at the time of its launch: in the introduction which accompanies the first *page au féminin*, they highlight the fact that '83% des achats sont effectués par les femmes'³. It made perfect sense to target women and encourage them further into the market; encourage them, in other words, to consume more, if consumption was one of the keys to modernisation. Consequently, *Madame Express* is dominated by guides to the latest fashions and accessories, its explicit aim being to make consumption easier for busy women and prevent it simply becoming another burden for those preoccupied with having to 'tenir une maison, élever des enfants, s'habiller'⁴.

As this last quotation suggests, an interesting message is to be found in the pages of *Madame Express*. The supplement is above all a space where Giroud can put forward her vision of the modern woman, a vision which inevitably defined itself in relation to that Simone de Beauvoir had begun to articulate in the wake of the Liberation. Giroud's was rather less radical, or more pragmatic, than that of de Beauvoir, of whom she was deeply critical. She considered de Beauvoir to be out of touch with the preoccupations of real women, and the reality of their everyday lives. Consequently, the vision of the modern woman which comes into focus in *Madame Express* is a complex, not to say problematic one. The world of *Madame Express* is certainly one of dynamic, active women, exemplified by Giroud herself; but that dynamism appears unproblematic as long as it does not affect their place within the traditional bourgeois framework. Modernity, at least as far as *Madame Express* is concerned, does not

seem to involve any profound change in women's roles. Rather, it is more about making those roles easier to play: the supplement promotes the merits of automatic kitchens, or suggests activities for the children during the school holidays. Above all, modernity is about changing styles, fashion and look — about something which can, and must be bought. *Madame Express* works assiduously to oil the wheels of the market, acting as an intermediary between consumers and producers and educating both in the mechanisms of the market. It sets up consumer tests which expose products to the rigours of competition, and alerts producers to the need to recognise the desires, and power, of the consumer: 'nous signalerons aux industriels, aux commerçants [...] les améliorations que les femmes souhaitent, les suggestions qu'elles font pour que leur vie quotidienne matérielle soit simplifiée'⁵.

L'Express, of course, is a far from disinterested player in this. It is in its best interests to ensure that the circulation of goods is maintained, and not simply because it is well placed to profit from increased advertising revenue. If economics is the *raison d'être* of *L'Express*, it is so not only because it is central to the philosophy promoted by the journal, but also because a healthy economy is essential for its own survival. For like the goods whose advertisements it carries, the magazine is itself a commodity. If it is to survive, it must be bought and read; it must carve out a place in the market and fend off its competitors. Indeed, it proves to be exemplary in this respect. It offers a textbook case of business success as it achieves consistent growth despite being launched with what Giroud calls 'un capital dérisoire' of \$20,000 (Giroud 1972: 161). This is because it operates according to precisely the modern, efficient practices being advocated within its own pages by people such as Mendès-France and Alfred Sauvy: as an alert business should, it exploits gaps in the market and capitalises on opportunities, such as the chance to expand its readership amongst women. In short, *L'Express* proves to be an appealing product. Its combative stance, and the participation of figures such as Mauriac and Sartre, contribute to the emerging image of the news weekly as the 'journal des intellectuels' (Serror 1960: 42) — an image which, as the constantly rising sales figures of the 1950s confirm, is popular and enticing. After 1955, the journal's print run never dropped below 120,000 copies. In a way, the fact that *L'Express* succeeds as a commodity is itself part of the point: the magazine is not simply promoting the new agenda, but proving its validity as it does so.

Now, the magazine's status as a commodity can be seen to have an important bearing on its evolution in the 1950s and 60s. Central to this is its need to resolve a tension between two conflicting motivations or logics at work within it: one of commitment, the other of commercialism. Both Giroud and Servan-Schreiber show themselves to be aware of the problematic relationship between the two, of the way in which commercial interests can interfere with the purity of motive associated with commitment. As Giroud puts it, 'la direction d'une entreprise de presse est difficile, parce qu'elle exige que celui qui prend les décisions d'ordre commercial sente précisément la nature particulièrement du "produit" journal' (Giroud 1972: 164). Her sensitivity is reflected in Servan-Schreiber's efforts to ensure the financial independence of the magazine and so protect it from outside interference.

Yet it will in fact be the logic of commercialism which wins out, and this victory is achieved partly, we could say, by the commodification of commitment — that is to say, by the way in which commitment becomes a part of the journal's popular and lucrative image. Indeed, this commercial logic can be seen to manifest itself most clearly in the journal's sensitivity to the image it projects — something which seems to mark its thinking from the start, as it exploits a bold new style to signal the new approach being advocated in its pages, and which becomes increasingly apparent through the 1950s and 60s. Moreover, the news weekly's preoccupation with its image is, arguably, not an isolated phenomenon, but can be seen to be indicative of a broader trend at work in French culture at the time.

In her recent study, Kristin Ross has characterised the period of the 1950s and 60s as marking the 'dawning of image culture' (1995: 12). She takes this to mean in particular the rise of the visual image in

culture, as film and especially television begin to assert themselves, and the world becomes mediated through image as much as, if not more than, text. However, the idea of the 'image culture' can also be understood in another way, one we can see being explored by Roland Barthes at the time. In his *Mythologies*, Barthes attempts to get to grips with a culture which is predicated increasingly on the circulation of projected images, constructed or intended appearances, and which feeds off them as much as reality — or rather, as he was intent on demonstrating, was taking those projected images *as* reality, systematically confusing the culturally constructed with the natural. Indeed, it is likely that this culture of appearance established itself more effectively thanks to the increased circulation of visual images. That there may be a link between the two is suggested by the way visual images provide a starting point for several of the analyses in *Mythologies*.

It is also perhaps borne out by *L'Express*'s own use and manipulation of images, its own recognition of the power of the visual image. Its relationship, not to say exploitation, of Mauriac is particularly striking in this respect. One of the most noticeable aspects of his collaboration with *L'Express* is that it leads to a proliferation of *images* of the writer. Images of Mauriac circulate in ways and volumes they had not previously. Moreover, these images seem chosen specifically to reinforce a certain image or preconception of both Mauriac and the intellectual. When the first *bloc-notes* column is published in April 1954, for example, it is accompanied by a photograph in the middle of three columns showing a meditative, sombre Mauriac with his eyes half-closed, in a position which is almost one of prayer⁶. The portrait is a potent one, loaded with motifs (isolation, reflection, spirituality) which reinforce a particular image, or perhaps more accurately, myth of Mauriac as intellectual. Elements of this myth are underlined further in the presentation of Mauriac which accompanies the article, and which introduces him as the voice of moral conscience: 'le grand écrivain catholique commente librement et avec le courage que l'on sait les événements de l'actualité littéraire et politique'⁷. This picture of Mauriac serves to confirm and reinforce our impression not just of him, but of the magazine as a whole. We are left with no doubt that *L'Express* is the 'journal des intellectuels'.

The emerging image culture also possesses another important dimension. In March 1958, *L'Express* published an article entitled 'Voici comment les magasins vous achètent...', on the latest advertising techniques being developed in America and spreading to France⁸. These techniques, claims to the article, work on the principle that what attracts the consumer isn't so much the qualities of the product itself, as the image associated with it — that consumers buy into an image as much as buy a product. Manufacturers, it suggests, are increasingly aware of the commercial value of the image, of the fact that an attractive image is the key to a successful commodity. In the light of this, it is surely no coincidence that the image culture dawns at the same time as consumerism is being encouraged, and begins to spread through French society, nor that several of the images Barthes analyses are those given off by an expanding range of consumer goods (detergents, cars, plastics). It is a time when goods must sell themselves, and fight off their competitors by projecting themselves more effectively. This burgeoning image culture is perhaps the first and most obvious sign of what will become known in the 1960s as the *société de consommation*.

In publishing an article on the latest selling techniques, *L'Express* may well aim to alert its readers to the wily ways of advertisers; but it is difficult not to see the magazine itself caught up in the same commercial logic of the image. In the case of Mauriac, for example, it seems that what counts is not just what he says about decolonisation, but that he is *seen* to say it, and above all that he says it *there*, in the pages of *L'Express*. Mauriac himself is quick to realise that Servan-Schreiber is interested in him not just for the symbolic capital he possesses, but also for the latent economic capital this represents. For as Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, symbolic capital is a 'véritable crédit, capable d'assurer, sous certaines conditions [...] des profits "économiques"' (1992: 235). Writing to Pierre Brisson in August 1955, Mauriac remarks wryly of Servan-Schreiber that 'je suis sa vieille poule aux œufs d'or. Mais quand il

n'y aura plus d'œufs d'or...'⁹. His collaboration with *L'Express* undoubtedly brings the consecration as an intellectual he desires, but it does so at the inevitable price of his commodification. Mauriac, in Servan-Schreiber's hands, is put into circulation and made to turn a profit.

The image to which he contributes is one which appears to strike a chord with the young especially: a survey carried out in 1959 found that 44% of the magazine's readers were below the age of 35. Moreover, it seems specifically to be the magazine's image as the *journal des intellectuels* which attracts them. As Sirtzky and Roth put it, *L'Express* became the magazine 'dont la seule lecture constituait déjà un engagement politique' (1979: 142). It became, in other words, the magazine to be seen reading — a response perhaps appropriate to those growing up in an image culture. What is more, the reaction of *L'Express* to this popularity is similarly appropriate to a journal at the forefront of such a culture.

In October 1957, *L'Express* undertook its famous survey of post-war French youth — the generation Giroud snappily labelled *la nouvelle vague*. On the one hand, the survey was a serious study, which exploited the latest polling techniques to provide the most complete picture of the nation's youth since 1870. Yet on the other, it provided the opportunity for an extensive marketing exercise, as the magazine worked to capitalise on and confirm its image as the 'journal des jeunes'. As Serror observed a few years later, 'on ne saurait sous-estimer la contribution de l'enquête d'octobre 1957 dans la formation de "l'image de *L'Express*"' (1960: 33). The survey was trailed extensively from mid-Summer 1957, when the project was announced, and between July and October 1958, the magazine adopted the sub-title 'le journal de la nouvelle vague'. The commercial importance of the *Nouvelle Vague* phenomenon for the magazine is also neatly summed up by the fact that it took care to copyright the slogan. In this way, the *Nouvelle Vague* operation became a clear attempt to reorient itself, to respond to market conditions and exploit its success in a particular area of the market. As such, it is an indication of the increasing importance of image in determining the direction of the magazine.

It is in the early 1960s especially when the commercial logic, the logic of the image, manifests itself most clearly. For if the image or style of a product is what determines its success, then ultimately, it will also determine its substance and development. After all, as we have seen, *Madame Express* itself set out to remind manufacturers that a commodity needs to be modified when it no longer responds to consumers' desires. It is striking to see the magazine pay heed to its own advice. With the end of the Algerian war in 1962, *L'Express* finds its sales falling rapidly, from a peak of nearly 200,000 in December 1961 to what was, by its standards, a meagre 125,000 in June 1964. The management team blames the fall on the magazine's vigorous campaigning during the war. With the war over, comments Sirtzky, 'les Français n'ont plus qu'une envie: oublier ce cauchemar. Ils ont donc tendance à vouloir oublier aussi *L'Express*' (1979: 253). Commitment, it seems, is no longer in fashion. The image which contributed so much to the magazine's success now loses it money. The solution is a radical one: the re-launch of *L'Express* in September 1964 sees the previous tabloid-size journal replaced by a magazine which copies the smaller, squarer format of established titles such as *Time*. Indeed, the cover design of *L'Express* apes that of the American magazine almost shamelessly, with its full-cover photo framed by a red border.

Two things are immediately apparent about the new-look *Express*. The first is the extent to which advertising copy invades its pages, with three or four full-page ads often to be found before the table of contents is reached. Secondly, the editorial content is made up entirely of anonymous articles. Where in the old *Express*, unsigned articles were intended to underline the collective nature of the enterprise, here they are a sign of the magazine's intention to be an efficient and neutral purveyor of information. There is no room for the often provocative columns and analyses by the writers and intellectuals who had populated its pages in the 1950s. Indeed, they had in many cases been gone for a while: Mauriac departed in 1961 for example, and Sartre had ceased to contribute articles by 1959¹⁰. The magazine's

new formula proved popular with both advertisers and readers. By the end of 1964, circulation was already beginning to rise again, and within ten years, it was heading towards the half-million mark.

I want briefly to explore more closely the motives behind the magazine's transformation, and the reasons for its newfound success. For if *L'Express* finds that its overtly combative stance becomes less appealing to its readers in the early 1960s — if, indeed, *engagement* itself seems to fall out of fashion — it seems that this is not simply a reflection of the desire on the part of the French to put the Algerian war behind them. Rather, the magazine's shift from opinion to information, and the eclipsing of the intellectuals who embodied its spirit of commitment, signals not only the emergence of an image culture, but also important changes in the society of which that culture is an expression. *L'Express* can be seen to shadow and evolve with its readers, and most notably with the readers of the younger generation who, in the 1950s, responded to the survey of the *Nouvelle Vague* and were eager to buy into the image of political commitment it offered. As these readers become increasingly caught up in the world, it appears that their political interests give way to more pressing concerns.

L'Express's new-found popularity with advertisers can be traced both to the format it adopts, and to its shift towards a political stance which is more overtly centrist; but it is due as well to the magazine's decision to address one audience in particular, an audience which is also the prime target of the advertisers themselves — namely, the newly-apparent social group of young and relatively wealthy middle-class workers known as the *cadres*, the engineers, technocrats and managers whose job it was to turn France into a modern and dynamic nation. The most incisive portrait of this new social order was provided in 1965 by Georges Perec in *Les Choses*. His novel provides an insight into a world which, through its calls for modernisation in the 1950s, *L'Express* helped to bring into being. It highlights too the degree to which the news weekly remained complicit with that world. A brief exploration of Perec's depiction of the era will allow us to grasp the tensions fuelling its development.

Perec reveals that if this new generation has lost interest in *engagement*, it is largely because they must face a more immediate problem: that of surviving in a burgeoning consumer society. His two central characters, the young professional couple Jérôme and Sylvie — Perec describes them as 'jeunes cadres n'ayant pas encore percé toutes leurs dents' (1965: 51) — find themselves in a world which tells them that they never have quite enough. It encourages, even obliges them to consume by implying that happiness lies above all in the possession of things, and more specifically, in the next thing waiting to be acquired: 'dans le monde qui était le leur, il était presque de règle de désirer toujours plus qu'on ne pouvait acquérir. Ce n'était pas eux qui l'avaient décrété; c'était une loi de la civilisation, une donnée de fait dont la publicité en général, les magazines, l'art des étalages [...] étaient les expressions les plus conformes' (1965: 50). *L'Express* is seen to play a pernicious role in this world. In fact, it can be described as one of the novel's other main protagonists, being at once the guide and master of the young couple. Jérôme and Sylvie may find themselves reflected in its pages — 'où auraient-ils pu trouver plus exact reflet de leurs goûts, de leurs désirs?' (1965: 47) — but the mirror held up by the magazine is a distorting one. For it becomes clear that they are shaped as much as reflected by the magazine. The steady stream of ideas it offers to make modern living more comfortable, and the scenes of success and contentment represented in the advertisements which populate its pages, force them to recognise and acknowledge their inferiority. They are left continually with a sense that their lives still lack something essential: 'et ils comprenaient, parce qu'on le leur enfonçait dans la tête à longueur de journée [...] qu'ils étaient toujours un petit peu plus bas dans l'échelle, toujours un petit peu trop bas' (1965: 51). Indeed, the couple can be seen as little more than products of the new world *L'Express* played a part in building, and which it helps to keep in place through its incitement to consume.

Yet the same can also be said of *L'Express* itself of course, standing as it does in a complex relationship to the new world it articulates. At once helping to shape that world as it spreads the word about the need for economic reform and modernisation in the 1950s, the magazine is itself shaped by it, its own

evolution influenced by the forces it calls to be released as it obeys the laws of the market. That the magazine should evolve from a *journal d'opinion* into a *journal d'information*, or that the logic of commitment is overshadowed by a logic of commercialism, is perhaps not a surprising story, but it is certainly a revealing one. Tracing the magazine's dialectical relationship with the world whose story it narrates has allowed us to get to grips with the prehistory of the socio-cultural configuration of image and consumption, of image consumption, which will dominate the France of the latter half of the Twentieth Century.

Notes

1. The most obvious example being Barthes' analysis of a front-cover photograph showing an African boy dressed in military uniform, saluting what is assumed to be the French flag. The image can be seen to connote the unity and inevitability of the French empire (Barthes 1972: 201).
2. 'La France peut supporter la vérité', *L'Express*, 16 mai 1953, p. 6.
3. *L'Express*, 10 avril 1954, p. 10. For further discussion of the part played by women in establishing the consumer society in France, and the role of the mass media in stimulating their participation and fuelling their desires through the images of modern domesticity it offers, see Susan Weiner (1995).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. For a discussion of the relationship between Giroud and de Beauvoir, see Ross (1995: 68-69). As Ross concludes, 'Sartre and Beauvoir spoke in the name of the people from Olympian heights, prescribing how they should live; Servan-Schreiber and Giroud spoke the language of the new bourgeoisie-without-blinkers, anticipating how they desired to live' (1995: 69).
6. *L'Express*, 10 avril 1954, p. 15.
7. Ibid.
8. *L'Express*, 20 mars 1958, pp. 16-18.
9. Correspondance avec Pierre Brisson, lettre du 13 août 1955, Paris, Bibliothèque Jacques-Doucet, fonds François Mauriac.
10. Indeed, Sartre had transferred his affections to *L'Express*'s long-time rival *France-Observateur*, which also relaunched itself in 1964 as *Le Nouvel Observateur*, having recruited disaffected members of the *Express* editorial team, such as Jean Daniel.

References

- Barthes, Roland (1972) *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil, coll. "Points".
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1992) *Les règles de l'art*. Paris: Seuil, coll. "Points".

Bourdieu, Pierre (1994) *Raisons pratiques*. Paris: Seuil, coll. "Points".

Giroud, Françoise (1972) *Si je mens...* Paris: Stock.

Perec, Georges (1965) *Les Choses*. Paris: Julliard.

Ross, Kristin (1995) *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: decolonisation and the re-ordering of French culture*. Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press.

Serror, Serge (1960) 'L'Express et l'opinion publique', Mémoire de DEA, Université de Paris.

Siritzky, Serge and Roth, Françoise (1979) *Le Roman de 'L'Express'*. Paris: Marcel Jullian.

Vinen, Richard (1996) *France 1934-1970*. London: Macmillan.

Weiner, Susan (1995) 'The *Consommatrice* of the 1950s and Elsa Triolet's *Roses à crédit*', *French Cultural Studies*, 17: 123-144.